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## ABSTRACT

Executive summary of a study that explored the role of student board members at two- and four-year institutions. The researcher mailed a survey to 590 randomly chosen student and non-student board members and received responses from 266 (45% return rate). Research insights, policy implications, and recommendations for the future were organized around the following themes: selection, orientation/training, attendance, participation, interaction with public officials, satisfaction with being on board, recommendation of continuing the practice of having a student board member. Key findings and recommendations include: (1) increasing the knowledge level of students on campus regarding the position of student board members; (2) electing student board members rather than appointing them; (3) providing quality training to student board members; (4) creating the position of student board member-elect as a means of enhancing the student's knowledge of key issues and policies; and (5) granting student board members full voting rights. With respect to this last recommendation, the author asserts that students with voting privileges will be more actively involved in the board and will be perceived as more legitimate by other organization members. (RC)

THE ROLE OF STUDENT BOARD MEMBERS AT  
TWO- AND FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS  
A Dissertation Executive Summary

by  
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## THE ROLE OF STUDENT BOARD MEMBERS AT TWO- AND FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS

Executive Summary of a Dissertation  
by Kimberly C. Lang, Ph.D.

Research was conducted centering on student board members at two- and four-year institutions. Both 'regular' and student members were contacted in order to ascertain their viewpoints on several areas of interest. An initial letter was sent on January 02, 2002 to 590 randomly chosen 'regular' and student board members, introducing the researcher and explaining the rationale for the questionnaire. The letter provided a website address to access the survey and an inventory number assigned to each person in order to maintain anonymity. Individuals were also provided with paper copies of the survey (either the student or 'regular' version) as well as a self-addressed stamped envelope so that participants could choose the format with which they were most comfortable.

Of the 590 board members asked to participate, 266, or 45.1%, returned completed questionnaires. From these, 36 pairs were returned from two-year institutions and 37 were returned from four-year institutions. Only pairs (defined as one student and one 'regular' board member from the same institution) were eligible for analysis in order that two perspectives on the same qualitative information could be gained.

The returned pairs were then screened for completeness. Of those returned, 31 pairs from two-year institutions and 30 from four-year institutions were complete. Thirty were randomly chosen from the two-year group and all pairs were used from the four-years. To be certain that analyzing the 60 pairs rather than all responses did not

distort the demographics, demographics for the entire respondent population were compiled and revealed no significant difference from the pairs involved in the analysis.

Information learned, policy implications, and recommendations for the future were organized around the 'themes' of:

- Selection
- Orientation/Training
- Attendance
- Participation
- Interaction with Public Officials
- Satisfaction with Being on a Board
- Recommendation of Continuing the Practice of Having a Student Board Member

#### *Selection to the Board*

##### Conclusions:

The majority of students are both previously aware of the board position and actively involved in campus activities prior to their placement. Among those students who are aware of the board position prior to their placement, their activities are usually 'general campus organizations', not 'governing organizations'. Relatively few student board members have been encouraged by adult leaders on campus to pursue the position. The majority of all student board members obtain their position through election. Within the two classifications of institutions, the vast majority of 2-year schools elect their student board members, while elected students at 4-year institutions are slightly more than half of the population.

##### Policy Implications:

All schools should publicize both the position of, and expectations for, a student board member. The benefits of attracting a qualified candidate are obvious. Adult leaders on

campus, such as faculty members, advisors of activities, and administrators, should be cognizant of students with the potential to become valuable members of their boards and encourage these individuals to explore that possibility. General campus groups should also be seen as breeding grounds for student board members, as opposed to viewing governing organizations in an exclusive light. Additionally, those institutions that appoint, rather than elect, their student member would do well to inquire if the students they are considering for the position have prior knowledge of it, as well as the responsibilities which accompany the role.

### *Orientation/Training*

#### Conclusions:

Student board members are in a unique, and often challenging, position. Despite being offered approximately the same amount of training as their 'regular' counterparts, it is clearly not sufficient for student board members. They display a lack of knowledge in several board-related areas, with the lower familiarity scores being garnered by those students who were elected to their position as well as those who received the least amount of training. All students, regardless of categorical classification, voice the strong opinion that supplemental training should be offered to their successors. Specifically, the area of 'personal assistance' demands the greatest attention. Those students with more training have a heightened awareness of the areas in which they lack knowledge.

#### Policy Implications:

Student board members should be offered more support and training in a number of areas by both their own institution as well as national organizations. This educational

undertaking needs to commence once the student is selected. Waiting until a student's term begins is detrimental to this pursuit, especially in light of the length of tenure relative to that of 'regular' members. The budgeting process is an area of particular weakness (please see "Participation" section) as is the subject of consortiums. While each institution is unique, developing a 'buddy/sponsor' system for student members holds the potential for exponential benefits.

### *Attendance*

#### Conclusions:

An overwhelming number of student board members in every categorical classification attend over 75% of board meetings. 'Regular' members are satisfied with this attendance rate, most strongly in the categories of: More Training, 4-Year Institution, Over One Student Board Member.

#### Policy Implications:

There is nearly universal satisfaction with student board member attendance. Any school which is not enjoying a high attendance rate from their student should enter into a dialogue with the individual in order to alleviate any problems and increase their presence.

### *Participation*

#### Conclusions:

The majority of boards, both two- and four-years, have one student member. Students universally feel most comfortable discussing 'Student Issues' and least comfortable with 'Institutional Issues', especially the budget. With the notable exception of students who

'Can Vote on All Issues', the majority of students do not introduce legislation. Their average satisfaction rate with their own participation is '7' on a 10 point scale, and they consistently view their overall impact as representing the student body.

'Regular' board members have similar, though not always statistically significant, views of their student members. They believe the students contribute most often to discussions centering on 'Student Issues' and least often to those on 'Institutional Issues'. 'Regular' members' satisfaction with student participation is generally in the '7' range. 'Regular' members' opinions regarding their students' right to vote is associated with the school's present system of suffrage.

Within the majority answers some trends were noted. The satisfaction of student members in their overall participation and interaction with other members decreases as their age increases, training decreases, and when there is more than one student member. The areas in which students feel most comfortable is more diversified for the categorical classifications of: 4-Year Institutions, Served on the Board 7 - + Months, Right to Vote (increased right = more diversity). Within the minority percentage of students who introduce legislation, students more often engage in it when they are members of the following classifications: Elected, Over One Student Board Member, Right to Vote (increased right = more frequent introduction of legislation). Schools which offer more training enjoy a notably higher level of satisfaction regarding student participation from both the student and 'regular' perspective. While students at 4-year schools record a lower satisfaction with their own performance than those at 2-year institutions, the satisfaction of 'regular' members with their students' participation is higher at 4-year institutions than 2-year schools. Students with voting rights have a higher degree of

satisfaction and a more diversified view of their duties than those without suffrage. It is important to note that satisfaction with student participation, as recorded by both student and 'regular' members, experiences a significant drop in the 'Three Years on Campus' category. This deserves further study.

#### Policy Implications:

Participation by students on the boards which they serve should be encouraged. By increasing the length and diversity of training offered to them, institutions can lessen some of their withdrawal, which many students reported results from the different background they have from 'regular' members as well as their shorter term relative to other board members. Students at 4-year schools should be reminded of the often laborious nature of a board and be reassured that their contributions are valuable in this process. The right of students to vote can provide a dynamic to student participation which institutions should consider and, if deemed appropriate, address. Additionally, the pathway students take to the board, whether elected or appointed, can influence the extent of their participation with elected students being more actively engaged in proposing/modifying legislation. All student members, regardless of their pathway to the board, should interact with a wide number of constituencies and be encouraged to participate in board business. Boards with appointed students, however, need to pay particular attention to this needed encouragement.

#### *Interaction with Public Officials*

##### Patterns of Interest:

While the information gained concerning this sub-topic was not found to be statistically

significant, some patterns of interest were noted.

Student board members, regardless of their categorical classification, do not have as much contact with public officials as the 'regular' members who serve on institutional boards. Within this overall conclusion it is noted that those students who are younger, previously aware of the position, receive the opportunity for more training, are serving for a longer period of time, and/or are one of several student members have a greater probability of interacting with public officials than their counterparts within these classifications.

#### Policy Implications:

Student and 'regular' members readily acknowledge 'Representing Students' as one of the main roles for a student board member (see 'Participation' section). This role includes keeping other constituency groups, including public officials, apprised of issues which are important to the student body. Where there is no legal barrier to such interaction, student members should be encouraged to discuss board-related matters with public officials. Acknowledging both the importance of such an endeavor as well as the barriers which may exist to such an undertaking (see 'Participation' section), 'regular' members should foster the process.

#### *Satisfaction with Being on the Board*

#### Conclusions:

Students' personal satisfaction with serving on an institutional board is influenced by both their ability to vote and the amount of training they receive. Within this general conclusion, those who are older, were previously unaware of the position, and/or were

afforded the opportunity for more training align themselves most strongly with the belief that training impacts satisfaction. Students who are previously unaware of the position, have more extensive voting rights, and are given a greater opportunity for training express the greatest belief that voting impacts satisfaction.

#### Policy Implications:

Student and 'regular' members both strongly support the continuation of having a student on their board (see 'Recommendation to Continue the Practice of Having a Student Board Member'). The students, however, clearly indicate that the degree of their personal satisfaction is associated with their voting rights and the amount of training they receive. While the presence of legal issues which bar student voting is readily recognized, all institutions would do well to consider the responses of students when discussing their satisfaction with the board.

#### *Recommendation to Continue the Practice of Having a Student Board Member*

#### Conclusions:

Regardless of any weaknesses they had previously noted in the survey, student and 'regular' members alike were overwhelmingly supportive of continuing the placement of students on their institutional board. Those who saw merit in alternative forms of student representation underscored their belief that this would be acceptable only as an addition to the current practice of having a student board member. Student and 'regular' members noted many benefits to student board members, both for the student body and the board itself.

### Policy Implications:

Institutions which do not have student members on their boards should carefully consider their stance on the issue. While the specific details of such an endeavor may vary, a plethora of benefits exist. Although further research is needed on the practices of institutions without student board members, the 98% consensus concerning the continuation of having a student member by those on boards which have such a position in existence gives strong evidence that the role is a beneficial one.

### *Recommendations for Implementation of Study Findings*

Throughout the process of gathering and analyzing information several common ideas emerged which may be of assistance to institutions. To that end, it is hoped that the following recommendations will serve as guidelines for schools when considering the role of student board members.

- *Increase the knowledge level of students on-campus regarding the position of student board members.* This will both strengthen the pool of interested candidates as well as create a more open dialogue between the student body and its student member when input is needed.
- *Elect student board members rather than appoint them.* Students are more likely to be interested in board activities when they are afforded the opportunity to directly select their representative.
- *Provide quality training to student board members which is informative, helpful, and timely.* Handing a newly elected student an orientation manual or meeting with them for an hour prior to their first meeting and regarding that as sufficient training is simply a travesty. It is imperative that those providing the training acknowledge that student members usually lack exposure to issues and circumstances that 'regular' members have experienced. Specifically, information on the budget must be reviewed extensively.
- *Create the position of 'student board member-elect'.* It takes a full year to be exposed to one cycle of issues that come before the board (examples: tuition, admissions, budget). By having a student member-elect observe board

meetings, these individuals can gain a vast amount of knowledge. This will benefit both the student and the institutional community as a whole.

- *Grant student board members full voting privileges.* Students with this right will be more actively involved in the board and be regarded as more legitimate 'players' than those without full suffrage. The position of student board member is a nearly futile one if the individual does not have a true voice in board decisions.

The author acknowledges that advocating for a student member position on an institutional board may lead members of other groups to call for additional 'reserved seating'. Advancing the argument that a student body is in a parallel position with other groups when seeking to influence the board is simply not logical. Faculty and staff, for example, often have the ability to address areas of concern through negotiations and contract decisions. Students are a unique group, without such power. Their voice will be more likely to carry weight if supported through the position of student board member.

By definition a groundbreaking study is only the leading edge of the scholarship which can be harvested. This is unquestionably true in the area of student board members. The issue itself is controversial, yet remained completely unexplored until this research. It is hoped that others will continue to pursue this topic which is as intriguing as it is pivotal.

Comments or question? Please contact the researcher at: [kimberlylang@hotmail.com](mailto:kimberlylang@hotmail.com)



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